

Bureaucracy in *Service of a Madman*

by Matthew Tompkins

When President Nixon attempted his “Madman Theory” gambit to pressure the North Vietnamese into peace talks, he is said to have instructed Henry Kissinger to “slip word to them that ‘For God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button.’”¹ Kissinger and other senior cabinet officials went about doing so, in meetings and calls with Soviet and other counterparts in an effort to convince the adversary that the unthinkable might just be possible.²

But what of the rest of the National Security apparatus? By serving in the agencies that would carry out the policies threatened or considered, every military officer, diplomat and civilian official was part of the Nixon Administration and a source for interlocutors to assess whether the threats really were credible—whether the President really was mad.

For those unfamiliar with the gambit, it was a response to the determination by strategists that nuclear weapons were so disproportionately catastrophic that no sane, rational leader could credibly threaten their use.³ The ploy was to convince the adversary that leadership wasn’t rational, at least not on the matter at hand. That despite even counterproductive repercussions, a decision maker was ready to take the actions threatened if pushed over the brink—thus bequeathing international relations the term brinkmanship. Although Nixon’s efforts to pressure the North Vietnamese popularized the idea, it actually emerged from the earlier work of strategists and game theorists like Thomas Schelling⁴ and Herman Kahn⁵ that underpinned many of the mutual deterrence strategies employed in the Cold War. And although it was developed as part of a theoretical body of nuclear strategy, it’s a tactic that could be employed to add credibility to any threat so seemingly disproportionate or immoral that it lacks credibility as a result.

So in that Vietnam episode or in the future, how could a professional, apolitical bureaucracy serve honorably when the strategy at hand specifically depends on speaking out-of-turn about

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whether the President is unstable? And really, if undertaken effectively the gambit removes the euphemism: it calls on those expected to loyally execute the President's orders to convince their contacts that they believe the Commander in Chief to be so unfit to make the decisions at hand that they're depending on an opponent's cooperation to navigate the crisis.

When I talk of "speaking out of turn," I'm setting a high standard for professionalism—that professionals in the diplomatic, military, and civil services should not only faithfully execute the lawful orders of duly elected leadership, but that such service includes refraining from open disparagement of that leadership or its decisions. I've made the case for that more circumspect professionalism elsewhere.⁶ Reasonable people may retort that it is acceptable or even responsible for the bureaucracy to openly criticize elected and appointed leaders or even to actively resist.⁷

But bureaucrats unencumbered by a professional expectation of dutiful discretion face little dilemma in the madman theory, as they're free to speak openly. The more challenging question is how to balance the demands of the strategy ("put the word out that I'm crazy and out of control") if one simultaneously hopes to maintain a professional standard that makes doing so unacceptable.

There are a number of questions guiding the professional official's decisions:

Does the official know the truth of the leader's rationality, or is (s)he left to speculate with the rest of the world?

Knowing the leader's mental state actually simplifies things to the point of almost absolute clarity. Whether you find the threatened action acceptable or immoral, you can follow the orders of the rational leader engaging in deception, or follow your conscience when serving the madman.

But few will be in the privileged position of

knowing the truth of the matter. No deception campaign succeeds by reading-in every member of the rank-and-file, so a critical component of effective deception is letting those down the chain of command believe that madness really is in the offing and spread the word that much more credibly.⁸

For such officials left to speculate, other questions become relevant.

Does the official at hand find the threatened act to be fundamentally immoral, or acceptable (even if ill-advised)?

If you join the outside world in finding the threat to be lunacy, your personal decision-making is less ambiguous, although much more consequential. History has judged that in the face of immoral orders the only responsible endpoint is resignation.⁹ The calculus then becomes a question of when and how to resign, which for most will depend on how involved your individual responsibilities are in carrying out the threatened course of action.¹⁰ But once heading down a path that could culminate in resignation, there's little to lose and everything to gain in putting the word out to avert the crisis. If it all turns out to be a bluff, you'll have inadvertently done your part to help sell it. If the threat is real, if the president is mad, sharing that concern with your contacts will end up being signposts along the road to resignation.

If you consider the threatened action to be lawful and would be prepared to do your part—large or small—in carrying it out, then there is little question that your professional obligation is to toe the party line. You may find the threat to be ill-advised and your interlocutors may worry it's mad or believe it's not credible. But professional bureaucrats implement policies they disagree with every day, and the outside world's reaction to this one shouldn't make it any different. Yet the uncertainty remains which decision you're faithfully implementing: a grave threat or a deception campaign that depends on

OFFICIAL'S PERSONAL MORAL DETERMINATION	OFFICIAL'S KNOWLEDGE OR BELIEF OF TRUE INTENTIONS		
	Knows the president's true state and intentions	Confident president is sane and bluffing	Uncertain, or confident president is sincere
Threatened action is morally acceptable	Follows orders <i>supporting deception or preparing to execute policy</i>	Support deception <i>risking pointless unprofessional behavior if mistaken</i>	Support policy <i>risking little if wrong, apart from missed opportunity to support deception campaign</i>
Threatened action is morally unacceptable	Act according to conscience and judgment, from "madman warnings" to resignation		

Figure 1. Hypothetical Official's Decision Matrix

convincing the adversary of your leadership's rabid lunacy?

Does the official believe the leader is truly irrational, or only feigning madness to make an outsized threat more credible?

The officials facing this dilemma can at least be left with one small consolation—what you do or don't say is unlikely to have an impact. Whether sounding alarm bells or remaining stoically silent, your response to the "lunacy" of the threat will almost certainly end up a Rorschach test that reflects what your interlocutors already believe rather than shifting their conclusions. In your silence the panicked will see confirmation in the form of an apparently untroubled bureaucracy ready to follow orders, while the skeptical will recognize a bluff if such an unreasonable threat is treated so nonchalantly by those responsible for its execution. In your warnings, the worried will see corroboration, while the skeptical are likely to remain so in the face of what they still believe to be a deception campaign masking a hollow threat.

Only if a varied and broad chorus of officials start sounding the alarm and even resigning *might* the skeptical become convinced that the threat is real. Given the uncertainty described above, this chorus would be composed of a combination of the morally alarmed who believe the President to be mad and the dutiful who believe they are supporting the deception.

Speak Up, Unless You're Ready to Follow Through

What a muddled mess. This is why madness—feigned or genuine—has no place in national security decision making.

But where in the quandary does that then leave the responsible professional? From the aggregate answers to the questions above, it follows that any official who finds the president's threatened act morally unacceptable should speak out against it. You'll either be supporting the deception, trying to stave off disaster, or proceeding down your path to resignation. If instead the threatened action doesn't cross any moral lines that would keep you from doing your part, then you should do just that—act without vocal dissent if you believe or know the threat to be genuine, or otherwise feign concern about the madness in the offing.

And if you're uncertain of the sincerity of the threat, it's time to return to the debate that was triaged above—whether you believe it is unprofessional for the professional bureaucracy to publicly dissent from decisions or leadership that is lawful but ill-advised.

Of course, in the end Nixon's gambit failed. One could argue that there have been other successful applications of this kind of strategic uncertainty, and it's been speculated that Nixon was trying to replicate Eisenhower's effective nuclear threats against the Chinese to end the

Korean War.¹¹ However, that incident hewed much more closely to Schelling's conception of the "threat that leaves something to chance." It left open the possibility that professionals behaving responsibly and following standard operating procedures might inadvertently escalate into a nuclear attack, rather than depending on them acting unprofessionally to sell the idea of presidential madness. This analysis of how such professionals might struggle to do so is a reminder that in an era when information is much more open, strategic deception aimed at opposing national leaders can easily sweep up rank-and-file members of the national security architecture at great peril to policy execution. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 H. R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power*, (New York: Times Books, 1978), 122.
- 2 James Rosen, Luke A. Nichter, "Madman in the White House," *Foreign Policy*, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/madman-in-the-white-house>.
- 3 Barry Nalebuff, "Brinkmanship and Nuclear Deterrence: The Neutrality of Escalation," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (Spring 1986), 19-30.
- 4 Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 187-204.
- 5 Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 256-310.
- 6 Matthew V. Tompkins, "Safeguarding a Nonpartisan Foreign Service," *The Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 93, No. 8, 17-19, and Matthew V. Tompkins, "The Golden Rule of Professionalism," *The Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 5, 19-21.
- 7 For example, see Daniel Hemel, "President Trump vs. the Bureaucratic State," *Notice & Comment*, (February 18, 2016), accessed October 28, 2018, <http://yalejreg.com/nc/president-trump-vs-the-bureaucratic-state-by-daniel-hemel/>; Maria J. Stephan, "Staying true to yourself in the age of Trump: A how-to guide for federal employees," *The Washington Post*, (February 10, 2017), accessed October 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/02/10/staying-true-to-yourself-in-the-age-of-trump-a-how-to-guide-for-federal-employees/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7b803544a8a7; Rosemary O'Leary, *The Ethics of Dissent: Managing Guerrilla Government, Second Edition*, (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Press, 2014); Jon Michaels, "Administrative Checks and Balances in the Trump Administration," *Just Security*, (November 11, 2016), accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.justsecurity.org/34327/presidents-arent-foxhole-administrative-checks-balances-trump-administration/>; and Eric Posner, "Are There Limits to Trump's Power?," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2016, accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/opinion/are-there-limits-to-trumps-power.html>.
- 8 James D. Monroe, "Deception: Theory and Practice," *Calhoun: The Naval Postgraduate School Institutional Archive*, June 2012, accessed October 28, 2018, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/7388/12Jun_Monroe.pdf.
- 9 J. Patrick Dobel, "The Ethics of Resigning," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (Spring 1999), 245-263.
- 10 Cécile Hatier, "The virtues and vices of resigning from office," *Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice*, Vol. 44, No. 3, (July 2016), 351-366.
- 11 William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Madman Strategy during Vietnam War," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 517*, May 29, 2015, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb517-Nixon-Kissinger-and-the-Madman-Strategy-during-Vietnam-War>.